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Comfort Women

Imagine, being taken at gunpoint, away from your home and family without your consent, then being forced into sexual slavery, and made to “please” soldiers, day in, and day out, for five years. This was exactly happened to over *200 000 women*, between the years of 1932 and 1945, just before and during WWII. That legion, this practical army of women and girls from Korea, China, Philippines, Netherlands and other countries that were ruled under Japanese empire, were either kidnapped, coerced, or tricked by Japanese soldiers, into becoming a prostitute for the Imperial Japanese Army (Kuki 246). Those innocent women, and, tragically, girls, were called ‘comfort women’. They were forced to perform sexual acts on Japanese soldiers. Women were being raped constantly, and “served”, on average, forty men a day. A fortunate few had just one day off a month, but most did not have breaks at all (The Comfort Women Issue, par.3). Eighty percent of all comfort women came from Korea (Hein 339). Koreans were seen to be ideal comfort women, because they believed unmarried Koreans were free of diseases due to their Christian beliefs, spoke the same language as the Japanese (the Japanese Empire forced Korean schools to teach exclusively in Japanese). Japan ruled Korea, meaning they served the Japanese Prime Minister at the time, Hideki Tojo (Hein 339). In 1932,

the first comfort station was built in Shanghai, China. Following that year, more comfort stations were created, in different areas of Japanese occupation. The comfort system was created because to avoid more tragic incidents, such as the Nanjing Massacre (also known as the Rape of Nanjing), to avoid anti-Japanese rebels, and to protect soldiers from diseases (Michiko 582). After Japan lost the Second World War in 1945 after atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, all surviving comfort women were released from their stations. Survivors were frightened of forced silence, and, as a result, did not tell their tragic stories until 1991; Ha-sun Kim was the first Korean who shared her experience as a comfort woman to the world (Kuki 246). The Japanese Government vehemently denied the existence of the comfort system, despite evidence such as documents, and former brothels found by citizens in what were previously occupied territories. According to a Chinese resident, he found a grave underneath his floor; as his home was formerly a brothel, he immediately recognized that it belonged to the comfort women working there (One Last Cry). Japanese history books do list atrocities that Japanese soldiers had committed during WWII, but did not include anything about the comfort women (Hicks 17). Some liken it to the Japanese covering up their tracks, sweeping old crimes under the rug. For years, many comfort women survivors have demanded an apology from the Japanese government, but Shinzō Abe (current Prime Minister of Japan) refused to believe Japan had committed this war crime. The Japanese government should give an official apology to the comfort women survivors because they were kidnapped or tricked by the Japanese soldiers, faced many hardships inside the comfort stations and the challenges they faced afterwards.

To begin with, comfort women were kidnapped or tricked by the Japanese soldiers. At first, comfort women were volunteers; however, due to high demands from soldiers, they

started to force girls into becoming comfort women. They targeted mostly young girls. Eighty percent of comfort women were between fourteen and eighteen years old (Hicks 31). While some did join willingly, or without physical resistance, some were torn forcibly from their homes. Before kidnapping them, they often raped them on the spot, and sometimes killed their family. One comfort woman, under the name Madam X, who was subject to this, wrote about her experience, stating *“in February 1942, two lorries full of Japanese soldiers came into our village... I was cooking at the time and was unable to escape. Three soldiers with rifles came to our house while the rest fanned out through the village. They burst in and grabbed me. My parents tried to rescue but my father was kicked in the head”* (Hicks 19). During this home invasion, the Japanese soldiers responsible for her capture raped her on the spot, and her brother was taken away (Hicks 19). After her kidnapping by the soldiers, she was recruited as a comfort woman. This was not a unique story. For instance, a survivor under the pseudonym Ms. P was also kidnapped from a village invasion by the Japan. Her treatment was more severe than Madam X's. *“On March 22nd 1942 when [Ms. P and her family] were working at home, two trucks-loads of Japanese soldiers stopped in front of their house...[Ms. P's father] tried to stop the soldiers from taking me to be raped. The soldiers killed him and then murdered my mother, after she had been raped. Three soldiers then raped, me and took me to a lorry”* (Michiko 584). Many soldiers took the comfort women to a local brothel, or shipped them to another country that was under the rule of the Japanese Empire. In particular, women taken from Mapanique, Candabo, in the Philippines, were sent to a local comfort station called the “Red House” (One Last Cry). The Red House was full of young girls kidnapped from the

village of Mapanique. Some girls were kidnapped in secret, without their parents knowing. Ok-sun Jung reported “*My parents went working in the paddy fields and I went to the village to get some water to prepare my parents’ lunch. An armed Japanese soldier grabbed me and took me away. My parents probably never found out what happened to me...*” (Tattoo 1). Another method was tricking girls by offering a job to them, such as offers to become a maid, a factory worker, or anything else that might have caught their attention. In this case, Mun Ok-Ju was looking for a job. A local man wearing a suit with a tie and leather shoes offered her a job in a restaurant. She agreed to work for him due to his outfit and desperately needed a job. She went along with a group of seventeen girls aged between fifteen and twenty-one, expecting the same job as her; unfortunately, they were sent to a comfort station, instead (Hicks 22). Girls like her were easily deceived and tricked, because they were young, and were desperately looking for money to support themselves and their family. Girls came to work for the jobs they were offered, not to become a sexual object. The Japanese government should take full responsibility for the comfort women who were taken by the Japanese soldiers.

Following this, Women faced many hardships inside the comfort station, in addition to regular rape and abuse. Comfort stations were scattered around countries that Japan conquered. There were 100 stations in North China, 140 in Central China, forty in South China, 100 in South Asia, and ten in the South Sea and Sakhalin (The Comfort Women Issue par.1). Many comfort women died in the stations due to torture, sexually transmitted diseases, murder at the hands of Japanese soldiers, and sheer exhaustion. Comfort stations varied in furnishing, and could be barrack-like facilities, hotels, homes,

shacks, or tents (Askin 15). Inside the rooms, you would normally see a bed or a mat placed on the floor. When comfort women entered the comfort stations, they were given a Japanese name. For example, Nora Okja Keller name became Akkio (Keller 1). In one case, a woman kept repeating her Korean name and family genealogy, along with the recipes her mother had passed on her all night. The soldier she “belonged to” had enough, and took her out to the woods. They impaled her on a spike, from the bottom of her torso, and out through her mouth. It was a lesson to the others, warning them to be quiet (Keller 4). Many girls in the comfort station were virgins, and some had not even yet started their period. Their virginity was auctioned off to the highest bidder, but after it was taken, they were free to all (Keller 4). When asked about how she felt about being in the comfort station, Kimiko Kaneda stated “(It) *felt as if we were taken there to be killed. I could do naught, but weep. No one talked. All were weeping*” (The Comfort Women Issue par. 4). Many comfort women even committed suicide. If they refused to do what the Japanese soldier who owned them commanded, they would be beaten, and tortured. Ms. Ok-sun Jung explained how the soldiers asked the comfort women if they could take 100 soldiers, but fifteen women did not raise their hands. They were killed on the spot, to make an example for the other girls. Some were placed on a board with nails sticking out. Some were beheaded (Tattoo 4, 5). Girls served the men from morning until night, without any breaks except for regularly doctor visits, to check for any diseases, sexually transmitted or otherwise. Maria Rose Henson stated “*There was no rest, they had sex with me every minute. There was only respite when every last soldier was finished*” (The Comfort Women Issue par.9). Maria would begin at 8:00 am, and sometimes didn’t even stop all

night. She did not have time to get dressed (Michiko 588). Soldiers often got drunk and further abused the girls. Soldiers often did not use condoms, which led to pregnancy. If the girls became pregnant, the doctors would terminate the pregnancies, and get on with their days. Keller explained how she had two choices on how to abort the baby. It was either rat poison or the stick. She chose the stick (4). Doctors often removed the women's wombs to prevent more pregnancies. The women had no freedom of choice in the matter. Ellen van Der Ploeg mentioned what it felt like serving the Japanese soldiers: "*For the Japanese, it was a house of pleasure; for us, a hell of fear, shame and, sorrow*" (One Last Cry). They were miserable, but the Japanese did not care about them but themselves. As far as the Imperial Army of Japan was concerned, these women were inanimate, unfeeling objects.

Subsequent, comfort women faced many challenges after they were released from the comfort stations. In 1945, Japan surrendered in WWII, they surrendered everything, including the comfort women. Some women were killed on the spot to avoid evidence, some were told to not speak about it under threat of death, and some were exiled. Jung-ok Sang explained the soldiers pushed the girls inside a pit, filled with snakes, and then buried them alive (Tattoo 6). Most comfort women survivors did not know where to go. They have two options: to continue living or to die. Many committed suicide, due to feeling ashamed and having nothing else to look forward to, or having nothing, they felt, to offer to their countries. Some stayed in the country where they were taken, because they felt mortified to return back to their home country. They could not return home easily. Women who did return to their village would be often judged by the other villagers, thinking

they were traitors (One Last Cry). They were often alone. Some women came back to their home country, but still suffered from the terrifying memories, physical disabilities, injuries and the sexually transmitted diseases (The Comfort Issue page 9). They were unable to forget the past they had left behind inside those comfort stations. Ms. P described how she was afraid to make love with guys or touch guys, even years after leaving that life behind (Michiko 585). Women who were married after the fact frequently hid their past from their spouse and children. Many comfort women often unable to produce babies due to abortion and birth control techniques, which made it harder for them to get married. Ms. P had her womb infected so badly that it had to be removed (Michiko 585). Their family and society rejected them. Some women ended up in prostitution after they were released from the comfort stations in order to survive, and sexual slavery was all they knew (Askin 24). It was almost as if they had never escaped from the comfort stations. They were deeply hurt and disturbed, yet had little support.

With this purpose in mind, the Japanese government should give an official apology to the comfort women survivors because they were kidnapped or tricked by the Japanese soldiers; they faced many hardships, both inside the comfort stations and after they were freed. Young girls were forced to leave everything behind and did something they did not want to do every day. Many have dreams and a bright future taken away from them, leaving them sorrow and pain. They were torture and raped constantly. They were not the same person as before. They cannot erase these horrifying memories, and will have to deal with them for the rest of their life. What those soldier was a crime against human rights. Out of 230 women official registered themselves as comfort women but only fifty-eight of

them are alive in the world (One Last Cry). Will the Japanese Government ever truly apologize to them before it is too late, and they all pass on, or will they never apologize at all? Every year, less and less comfort women survivors remain in the world. Today, there are organizations to help out the comfort women survivors such as 'The House of Sharing' (One Last Cry). Every Wednesday, survivors and supporters would go to the Japan General Government building in Seoul, Korea and beg for an apology (One Last Cry). By Japan government apologizing to them, they may finally rest in peace, and we can begin to move on into a brighter future.

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